

Women on the Oil Frontier: Gender and Power in Aramco's Arabia

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The Arabian American Oil Company (Aramco), which controlled the world's largest crude oil reserve and was once the largest American investment overseas, often claimed that its petroleum extraction activities contributed to the modernization of Saudi society. Scholars have critiqued Aramco's narrative of enlightened self interest by showing how the company clung to a racialized labor hierarchy and repeatedly eschewed reforms. This essay continues that criticism by examining Aramco's policies on women and the family. Using internal memos and publicity materials released between 1940 and 1970, this study reveals how Aramco's American owners used gender to understand, manage, and Orientalize their Saudi employees. In its public image, Aramco claimed to be liberating Saudi women from an anachronistically oppressive society. Yet in the jobs it did (and did not) offer to women, as well as the housing options it gave to Saudi families, the company's policies demonstrate a similarly patriarchal logic at work.

IN EARLY 1960, THE ARABIAN AMERICAN OIL COMPANY (ARAMCO) was facing a peculiar dilemma. The company had instituted a Home Ownership Loan Program in 1951 designed to house its Saudi employees in American-style dwellings on new company town sites in the Arabian Peninsula. The homeownership program was a part of a wider series of modernization and industrialization efforts aligned with Aramco's espoused philosophy of enlightened self interest. The company claimed to be raising standards of living and introducing American ideals to Saudi Arabia's primitive frontier society, simultaneously boosting company productivity and improving the lives of Saudis. Yet, despite these apparent benefits, the housing initiative was failing. After eight years, only 402 of Aramco's nearly 15,000 Arab employees were living in Rahima, and of that number, only one percent of houses were occupied by the employees' families.¹ The men at the Arabian Affairs Division were perplexed by this rejection of modern American conveniences: "Why are non-participants not taking part in the program?" reads one internal memorandum. Following the time-honored traditions of Western interaction with the Middle East, the company hired a white academic to "gather data" from the Saudi workers and "isolate those factors which are relative to participation in the program" in order to answer this question.² Phebe Marr, a Radcliffe-trained scholar of Middle Eastern Studies, was chosen to lead the research in part because her gender would provide her with unique access to the viewpoints of Arab women. Despite its Orientalist origins, a critical reading of the study provides a detailed portrait of the Saudi Arabian family that shatters many myths about Arab women, Middle Eastern gender roles, and the true nature of Aramco's benevolent paternalism.

Marr's study found that Saudi women much preferred their traditional houses to those fashioned on Aramco's model. Moreover, the women exercised considerable influence over their husband's decision to enter the program, and their refusal to accept the new houses ultimately led Aramco to refine the housing initiative. This episode overturned many of the company's assumptions about Arab women and Arab families. Ever since the company began drilling operations in Arabia in the 1930s, Saudi gender roles had been depicted as archaic and oppressive, and the modernization introduced by Aramco was seen as the catalyst of positive change for Saudi women. However, as Marr's study showed, this false narrative reflected Aramco's own gendered assumptions.

Many previous studies of oil frontiers take gender as a secondary unit of analysis upon which to build a larger narrative about labor and power. Yet, as Marr's report demonstrates, gender played a crucial role both in how the Arabian oil frontier functioned and how it was represented. The oil frontier, a place already fictionalized in Western imagination, was lent even more exoticism in Saudi Arabia thanks to the presence of an unfamiliar system of gender roles. The understandings of Arab men and women as fantastically different from the West fed into the Orientalist myth of Aramco's enlightened self-interest, which Robert Vitalis so expertly dissects in his book *America's Kingdom*. Vitalis chooses race as a lens through which the American encounter with the Middle East can be understood. However, critically comparing company publications to Aramco's actual policies reveals that gender is an equally crucial component of the Aramco myth. Despite Aramco's insistence on the fundamental difference between Arab and American women, both groups were ultimately trapped in similar patriarchal systems. Given gender's ties to race, class, and the systems of inequality that they support, it is past time that the role of gender in the Aramco oil frontier be given serious scholarly attention.

The perceived need for Marr's study was emblematic of the Orientalism inherent in Aramco's understanding of Saudi society. Orientalism, as defined by Palestinian-American humanist Edward Said in his seminal work of the same name, is "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient."³ Through supposedly academic and scientific methods, Orientalists create and monopolize a discourse that emphasizes the fundamental difference and power imbalance between the West and the East. Indeed, the very existence of the Arabian Affairs Division, an organization dedicated to "accumulating" the "maximum possible knowledge of Arabia and the Arabs in order to operate successfully in the Arab world"⁴ is proof of the Orientalist understandings that guided Aramco's operations in the Middle East. Western depictions of non-Western places and people as exotic, different, and inferior played an integral part in the historical and contemporary processes of empire.

Marr's study is also evidence that gender plays a key role within Orientalist discourse. Said identified gender as one of the components within Orientalism as a multidimensional system. Orientalism as a field of study, he writes, is "an exclusively male province [that] viewed itself and its subject matter with sexist blinders" and the Orientalist's "male conception of the world . . . tends to be static frozen, fixed eternally. The very possibility of development, transformation, human movement—in the deepest sense of the word—is denied the Orient and the Oriental."⁵ Gender was very much a subsidiary unit of analysis in Said's arguments, which focused on race and religion as key axes of difference. But with the rise of feminist history in the 1970s and 80s, more authors came to acknowledge that "attention to gender it often not explicit, but it is

nonetheless a crucial part of the organization of equality or inequality. Hierarchical structures rely on generalized understandings of the so-called natural relationship between male and female,”⁶ in much the same way that Orientalist structures rely on the supposedly natural distinction between East and West. Subsequent feminist scholars have since expanded on Said’s argument, challenging the ways in which he “relegated gender and sexuality to a subfield in [his] analysis of colonial discourse,” and instead arguing, “stereotypes of the Middle Eastern woman have been crucial to negative depiction of the region and its culture.”⁷ This observation was dramatically reflected in the ways in which Aramco both depicted gender on its oil frontier and formulated its policies on a gendered basis.

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Orientalism has only recently begun to influence the study of the frontier, the use of which as a theme of historical analysis precedes the work of Said. Frederick Jackson Turner, writing at the turn of the 20th century, used the frontier as a means of understanding the development of American institutions and democratic values. Yet Turner’s original Frontier Thesis was dominated by the actions of white men, whom Turner saw as the region’s primary actors. The influence of postcolonial thought, and Said’s work in particular, caused historians in the 1980s to understand the frontier within the wider process of colonization. Historians of the New West began to incorporate interdisciplinary and minority perspectives into the story of the American frontier. The experiences of women in particular have provided a critical lens through which historians have reinterpreted frontier history and brought marginalized voices to the forefront. Despite the freedom from traditional barriers that the frontier supposedly offered, recent scholarship has emphasized the monotony, restriction, and violence that occurred in the everyday lives of frontier women. Laura Woodworth-Ney, for example, writes in her study of mining communities of the American West that “sexual violence against Native women was part of a larger colonial interaction. White men appropriated Indian women’s sexuality as part of the process of conquering Native territories.”⁸ Similarly, Julie Jeffrey finds in her review of women’s experience in the American West that pioneers took restrictive Victorian gender norms to the frontier with them. “I hoped to find that pioneer women used the frontier as a means of liberating themselves from stereotypes and behaviors which I found constricting and sexist,” she writes, before lamenting, “I discovered that they did not.”⁹

These lessons from the American frontier provide a power model for the study of the Saudi Arabian oil frontier, where Aramco deployed many Orientalist depictions and strategies in its treatment of race and gender. Indeed, Aramco repurposed many elements of the American frontier mythos, both implicitly and explicitly, in its own accounts. *Discovery!*, a novel the company commissioned from famous Western author Wallace Stegner, juxtaposes the simple “Indian” Bedouins of Saudi Arabia with the dashing Aramco oilmen who were “heir to every quality that America had learned while settling and conquering a continent.”¹⁰ The image of the frontier, and the nostalgia that it elicited in American audiences, was skillfully deployed by Aramco propagandists to

enhance the firm's image in much the same way that images of the American West were used to romanticize Israel during the Cold War.¹¹ This romantic frontier narrative continues to be recycled. Contemporary commentator Thomas Lippman imagines the early Aramco "pioneers" as "explorers camped around a fire, like cowboys in the American West."¹² These accounts, while glorifying Aramco and the white men who founded the company, leave little room for the agency of Arab and American women.

Only more recently have historians begun to skeptically analyze the Aramco frontier narrative. In *America's Kingdom*, Vitalis attacks the myth of Aramco's enlightened self-interest, instead arguing that the company deliberately exported a racist and exploitative mode of oil extraction to Arabia. Drawing from critical scholarship of Orientalism and the frontier, Vitalis uses internal company documents to demonstrate how Aramco adapted a labor relations model based on rigid social and racial hierarchy. From the beginning of the company's operations in Saudi Arabia, local laborers were denied access to the various privileges enjoyed by American managers and engineers in their foreign enclave at Dhahran, much in the same way that 19th century mining industries in the American Southwest segregated workers based on national origin. Vitalis argues that the Home Ownership Program that Phebe Marr was hired to investigate was not adopted out of Aramco's generosity, but rather as a minimal concession to Arab workers which was "envisioned as a device in the effort to keep American Camp white."¹³ Yet Aramco expended considerable effort, through publications like *Discovery!*, on excluding these inequalities from its public image. Vitalis makes numerous comparisons between Aramco's operations and those of other Western oil companies working in frontiers across the world in order to disprove this civilizing narrative. In doing so, his work joins in conversation with scholars such as Miguel Salas, who has studied the creation of a Jim Crow system of labor in the nascent oil industry of early 20th century Venezuela. This comparative framework allows Vitalis to debunk Aramco's exceptionalist myth by exposing the racialized violence at work on the Arabian frontier.



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Yet despite this scholarly progress, the full extent of the role of gender within Aramco's operations remains poorly understood. Previous studies see gender as a little more than an ancillary variable within a wider labor management system that relied primarily on race. Salas, for example, argues that Creole Petroleum advocated a limited form of women's liberation designed to "normalize the role of women in the labor force, not challenge traditional notions of patriarchy."¹⁴ Vitalis similarly argues, "from the original decision to provide family housing at the end of World War II, gender was a kind of technical factor of production for the firm's principals to use to arrest the massive and costly turnover in personnel."¹⁵ Nathan Citino offers perhaps the most detailed study of the role of women in the Arabian oil frontier in his analysis of Aramco's exportation of American modernization ideals. He finds that the company "foster[ed] an idealized domesticity"¹⁶ that emphasized the nuclear family unit and women's domestic role among both its American and Arab employees as a means of managing the company's labor supply. Studies such as these echo the work of Americanists, who have found that systems of gender norms rigidly dictate the division of labor on the frontier. However,

the holistic operation of gender on the Aramco oil frontier, beyond its relevancy to labor, remains poorly understood. Salas devotes only one chapter to women and family in the oil camps; Vitalis only four pages. Yet as Marr's study of the Home Ownership Program demonstrates, women and the gender systems they were subject to played a key role in actual and imagined understandings of the frontier. Although Aramco's Orientalist narrative emphasized the difference in American and Saudi treatment of women, comparison between these two groups reveals that all women were subject to similar forms of patriarchy and paternalism.

Early American depictions of Arabia drew heavily from Orientalism's long tradition of sexualizing and exoticizing Middle Eastern women. Company publications tended to exaggerate and even fetishize the fantastic strangeness of Arabian culture. One American article about relationships between Western men and Arab women noted that "such girls combine beauty and sophistication with a very eastern desire to please her man."¹⁷ When Arab women were not treated as sex objects, they were often represented as repressed subjects of a patriarchal system. Traditional practices of Saudi women, such as veiling and avoiding contact with men, were seen as anachronistic markers of Arab backwardness. Stegner, for example, wrote in *Discovery!*, "In Riyadh, the contact between the ancient world and the modern was lightest, neither in Jiddah nor in most of al-Hasa would the sight of a woman's face have caused this amount of staring."¹⁸ Saudi Arabian gender roles were not only depicted as patriarchal, which they were, but also as symbolic of wider cultural mores and worth. One Aramco study claimed that "the fear of conservatively minded people of anything disturbing the traditional position of women . . . has a general significance going far beyond the limited but important sphere of relations between the sexes." Studying the "psychoanalytic content" of these fears, the authors suggested, would "provide important information on the motivational structure of those in the traditional sectors of the society fearful of modern trends."¹⁹ Such use of pseudo-scientific analysis to make sweeping generalizations about non-Western cultures is a hallmark of the Orientalist academic tradition. Its use in this case reveals just how important Western understandings of Arab gender roles were in forming Aramco's mythical narrative about the Middle East. The use of these gendered depictions to highlight Arab otherness and lack of development continues into the present day. Anthony Brown, writing in 1999 about the amenities available in the Aramco company town, noted that "the company's benevolence knew few bounds, except in one direction: all women had to conform to the Saudi's code of female behavior." Shortly thereafter, Brown echoes the earlier Aramco literature when he characterizes Saudi gender norms as "little changed since the days of the Book of Genesis."²⁰ In this way, Aramco and its allies used gender as a way to emphasize the otherness of the Arabs they employed and to legitimize the company's civilizing mission.

Even American women participated in the othering of Saudis along gendered lines. The casual racism contained in many memoir accounts of the 1950s and 60s is striking. The practice of veiling, in particular, became a shorthand symbol of Arabian darkness and foreignness. Mary Hartzell, an Aramco librarian, described the Arab women she encountered as "shapeless black figures,"²¹ while Aramco wife Nora Johnson recounted grotesque tales of the "strange, masked Bedouin women," who "put their placenta in a jar and keep it for months, or forever" and "wash their hair in camel pee."²² Mildred Logan, whose husband supervised Aramco's farm project at Al Kharij, deplored "the dirt, filth, and ignorance which exists among the bedouin people . . . The women peer around the



Linda Wu (2017)

corners like Halloween characters. Just two peepholes for their eyes in the stiff black masks - or veils, if you feel like being romantic . . . The Arabian women don't have the same conception of cleanliness that I have been taught. They seem not to have a care."²³ Americans had internalized Orientalist depictions of Arabs and Arab women, and were all too willing to read themes of repression, poverty, and backwardness into the people they encountered in Saudi Arabia. Johnson sympathized with Arab women, whom she calls "dark caricatures of what my life had become," but only to the extent that she feared their apparent suffering could eventually be her fate as well. "If I seemed more evolved than [Saudi women]," her memoir recounts, "it was deceptive, for they were there first, they were the basic form that pulled and threatened all my culture and education, as though I could be drawn back and turned into one of them if I stayed too long. I was afraid of the power of this place and its violent culture." Johnson was a college-educated author who found the tightly controlled housewife tedium of Aramco's "phony plastic Levittown" in Dhahran stifling enough.²⁴ To her, Arabia's unfamiliar gender roles epitomized the worst of the Orient's "violent culture" for which she felt not only revulsion, but fear.

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With the rise of women’s liberation movements in the West in the 1960s, depictions of Arab women began to take on new overtones. Within the new feminist discourse, Arab women were no longer simply symbols of Eastern backwardness; they became repressed subjects in need of saving. The 1951 Aramco handbook, for example, noted that “the position of women is far different from what it is in Western or even other oriental countries. Women are kept in extreme privacy and . . . they are heavily shrouded in black.” But by 1968, that statement had been amended to read “the position of women in Arabia is different from what it is in Western countries, but nothing is changing more radically than women’s place in society.”²⁵ Responding to the development of second-wave feminist movements in the West, Aramco changed the way it understood women within its wider exceptionalist myth. Juxtapositions between anachronistic Arab gender roles and liberated Western ones came to support Aramco’s claim to enlightened self-interest, as Aramco claimed to be introducing positive changes to the lives of Arab women. In fact, the company’s publicity magazine *Aramco World* ran a whole issue in 1971 intended to “modify the worst distortions that have been imbedded too long and too deeply in Western imaginations”²⁶ by highlighting the successes which Arab women were able to achieve in the new, modernizing Middle East. Stories noted that Arab women were “filling jobs and entering professions which were long barred to them by tribal, religious and familial custom,”²⁷ thanks to exposure to “the heady influence and challenges of more liberal societies.”²⁸ Although rarely stated explicitly, the firm’s reports in the 1960s and 70s indicate a nominal incorporation of feminist empowerment into its Orientalist modernizing mission. Another company study wrote that Aramco’s construction of two girls’ schools in the Eastern Province was “a justifiable and humane [policy, which] cannot but throw into marked contrast the poorer record of the

government itself in meeting popular demand and modern standards in its educational efforts.” Elsewhere, this report distinguishes between “advanced” Arab families who lived in single-family Aramco company housing, and “traditional forms of family life” which lacked “modern personal and sanitary standards.”²⁹ Such language implicitly tied the industrialization and economic activity initiated by Aramco to the development of progressive gender roles and family practices modeled on the liberal Western model. In the context of Aramco’s supposed modernizing mission, gender came to be understood not only as a primary signifier of Arab otherness, but as an anachronistic aspect of Arab society which Aramco’s modernizing reforms were changing for the better.

However, when one actually examines Aramco’s policies as they related to Saudi women, this narrative appears entirely false; nowhere was this more apparent than in the failure of the Home Ownership Loan Program. Aramco officials had assumed that Arab families would be only too happy to adopt modern, American domestic conveniences and housing patterns. However, Marr’s study revealed that these assumptions were, in many cases, simply wrong. She found that “even outside of the family unit segregation of the sexes is nowhere enforced as strictly as is commonly believed.” As a practical matter, it was impossible for village women to avoid contact with men to the extent imagined by Americans. Arab women, far from being shapeless black figures, had active social lives centered around “visiting relatives and friends in the vicinity of their homes or gossiping, often while working.” Women, moreover, wielded a decisive influence on their families’ decision to move to the new townsites, using threats of divorce, enlisting the help of male relatives, or “constant nagging” to achieve their objectives. The women Marr interviewed were almost all opposed to the new Aramco towns, where homes featuring unfamiliar appliances were constructed for nuclear families. This configuration separated extended Arab families, which usually lived in one large household, resulting in a “more confining” environment that lacked the traditional social network of relatives and neighbors, and thus provided women few opportunities to leave the house.³⁰ For these reasons, Saudi women emphatically rejected the American-style houses. Aramco’s Orientalist assumptions of Saudi women, which failed to take into account their preferences or agency within the family, were incapable of predicting the nuances that Marr’s study found, and ultimately accounted for the failure of the Home Ownership Program.

Aramco also failed to live up to its claims of Saudi liberation in the field of education. In the late 1950s, in response to Saudi demands, Aramco began operating a number of scholarship programs “aimed principally at helping Saudi Arabia achieve new levels of education.” One of these programs paid for five Arab women to attend the American University in Beirut’s School of Nursing. This program, the company claimed, was designed to assist Saudi young women to become “better qualified to assist the Middle East to surpass even its glorious past.”³¹ However, it appears that Aramco’s commitment to girls’ education did not extend far past these five women. The company had briefly flirted with the idea of educating the children of its Saudi workers in the late 1940s, but rising costs and the threat that this education posed to the privilege of American families soon ended the experiment.³² Aramco passed off the expensive responsibility of primary education to the Saudi government, which finally opened the first girls’ schools in 1960. Although the beginning of women’s public education in the kingdom was at first attributed to the progressive leanings of the royal wife Iffat, recent scholarship has reinterpreted this development as a product of the power struggle

between King Saud and his rival Faisal. Both brothers claimed credit for the girls' schools in an attempt to "justify a claim to developing the country,"³³ much in the same way that Aramco itself had used nursing programs to support its modernization rhetoric. Regardless of the intentions, the result of public education has been far less than full emancipation for Saudi women. To its credit, Aramco agreed to pay for the construction of some of these schools in agreements signed in 1953 and 1961, and by 1975 the company had invested \$79 million in 54 elementary and junior-high schools for girls and boys. However, responsibility for administering girls' schools was not given to either Aramco or the Ministry of Education, but instead to the General Presidency for Girls' Education, which was controlled by the ulama. These schools have since been used by the kingdom's conservative religious elite to "indoctrinate generations of women in its social and religious outlook," contributing to further entrenchment of traditional Saudi patriarchy.³⁴ This conclusion was supported by Aramco observations of the new schools, which made note of "the limited material which girls are given in the classroom . . . The Arabic composition questions laid emphasis on obedience to superiors and conformity to social norms."³⁵ Although the report did not elaborate on how exactly the exam questions emphasized obedience and conformity, it is clear that Aramco was entirely aware that the girls' schools it was sponsoring were not preparing Saudi women to liberate themselves in any significant sense of the term.

Moreover, Aramco, despite its stated commitment to female empowerment, actively refused to employ the women who graduated from these new schools. A 1961 memo reveals Aramco's internal consideration, and ultimate rejection, of hiring Saudi women. Many reasons are listed for this decision, including the prohibitive cost of building the facilities necessary to minimize contact between men and women. However, the most important factor identified was Saudi Arabia's own supposedly alien gender roles. "The 'honor' of a woman is highly prized, and the protection of this honor, which is a family possession, is the responsibility of the girl's guardian" the report claims, before going on to suggest that if Aramco were to hire women, it must "accept these responsibilities or secure a firm agreement with the girl's guardian that the Company will be released from such responsibilities."³⁶ Such claims about the supposed role of Arab women were a time-honored cliché of the Aramco Orientalist myth. Some Saudis, both male and female, were in fact eager for their daughters to become educated and employed, a fact revealed by a 1963 Aramco survey that reported that respondents "favored jobs for women, although some were opposed. Teaching and medicine were mentioned as suitable fields for women."³⁷ Indeed, it is supremely ironic that Aramco would later take credit for encouraging Arab women to pursue nursing careers, because it did exactly the opposite in the 1961 memo. In 1974, *Aramco World* ran a story about the growth of the nursing profession among Arab women, which the magazine attributed to Aramco's founding of a nurse-training program in 1950. The new nurses produced by these Western programs, asserts the author, are "achieving cleanliness where there was dirt, bringing forth light where before there was darkness, health where there was sickness, and confidence where there was only fear."³⁸ One wonders where these new Arab nurses were working, because it was probably not at an Aramco hospital. Much like the Saudi government, Aramco wanted to appear progressive for the sake of its international reputation, but lacked the significant political will necessary to reverse a long history of marginalizing women in the public sphere.

The refusal to hire Arab women reveals a fundamental contradiction in Aramco's

Orientalist narrative: Saudi society was blamed because of its backwardness and oppression, but policies were equally guided by Aramco's own racial and gendered systems of inequality. Hiring Arab women posed a threat to Aramco's carefully constructed labor hierarchy. Educated Arab women would "demand a high job level (at least Grade 27 or above), Senior Staff housing and the use of all Senior Staff facilities. There may be a problem in adjusting the job level to the girl's qualifications in order to confer Senior Staff status." Eligible female candidates, if they were to enter a labor hierarchy that had long excluded them on the basis of their gender and ethnicity, would buy into that hierarchy's system of privilege despite the incompatible color of their skin. Skilled Arab women, the report assumes, would demand entry to Aramco's segregated American enclave that had been euphemistically dubbed Senior Staff Camp. Aramco had initially imported single American women to avoid just such a scenario. Ultimately, the report concluded, "Aramco is not likely to be criticized for not hiring a large number of Saudi women."³⁹ Whatever commitment the company may have had to the employment of Saudi women was far outweighed by the thorny problems this liberation posed to both Saudi and American social arrangements. The company was not likely to face serious public opposition for its decision to relegate women to a subordinate role, and thus it felt no compulsion to act. Through this policy, Aramco became an accomplice to contradictory trends in Saudi society in the 1970s and 80s that encouraged women to become educated but barred their access to many careers. The lack of "urgency to find [women] jobs when they finish their schooling" is one of the paradoxical Saudi gender roles identified by feminist scholar Madawi al Rasheed which continues to this day. Without Aramco's presence, she writes, women's education "would not have been possible in a country like Saudi Arabia. However, oil wealth has inhibited women's economic participation."⁴⁰ Rather than working to liberate women, Aramco's policies sustained patriarchal norms that continue to keep Saudi women out of the public sphere.

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Aramco's commitment to systems of racial and gendered hierarchy was also reflected in its treatment of American women. Despite Orientalist assumptions of difference, Aramco viewed both the Arab and American women it employed or housed in similarly patronizing ways. The company employed about 300 single American women as secretaries, typists, and nurses. Aramco selected these women as a matter of convenience, as employing Americans to do these jobs allowed the company to avoid housing skilled non-Westerners in Senior Staff Camp, which was in practice reserved for whites only.⁴¹ The gender of single American women was used, much like the race of Aramco's Arab employees, as a method of differentiation and control. Women were assigned 'pink collar' jobs which did not merit the attention of male engineers and executives, but which entailed too much training, education, and most importantly, status, to go to non-Americans. However, the privilege of single American women did not protect them from degradation and disparagement. Aramco memoirist Larry Barnes, for example, recounts numerous episodes of casual sexism, including lewd comments on the figure of a teenage American girl. Barnes describes single women developing a "Queen

Complex” from the attention lavished on them by the much larger pool of single American men, and goes so far as to accuse the women of “immediately attributing their popularity, not to their scarcity, but to their innate charm. One not-overly-young lady,” he writes, was reputed to “have flown on her own broom” to Saudi Arabia.⁴² Such tasteless accounts are typical of the muckraking tone of Barnes’s memoir, but nonetheless provide evidence of the misogyny that American women faced in Aramco communities. Other studies also reported that the “sexual behavior of the single female employee is the subject of a great deal of interest, talk, and speculation” by Aramco men.⁴³ These accounts must give pause to any who would assume that Saudi society was qualitatively more paternalistic than Aramco’s manufactured company towns were.


The level of monotony, isolation, and violence that many American women faced on a daily basis was, in fact, comparable to the experiences of Saudi women outside the walls of Dhahran. Repeated depictions of Arab women as victims of a patriarchal system distracted from the extent to which the institutions at work in Aramco’s company towns were themselves problematic. Despite Aramco’s touting of the “clubs and community recreational activities” as well as the genial “life of a small town” available for families in Ras Tanura and Dhahran,⁴⁴ the social lives of American women were just as restricted as those of Saudi women.

At no point was the false dichotomy between Arab and American gender roles made more clear than when, in 1956, New York anthropologist Solon Kimball produced a short study of Aramco’s American enclaves which shone an ethnographic light on the company’s practices. Kimball’s study confirms the discontent and unease that Nora Johnson expressed in her memoir. “The oil industry is a man’s world,” he notes, “and the production of oil under frontier conditions is not favorable to the establishment of stable family and community relations.”⁴⁵ Much like the nearby Arab families in the Qatif oasis that were “compartmentalized into two worlds, the man’s world and the woman’s world,”⁴⁶ married American women were relegated to the domestic sphere. Women rarely left American camp, and their social opportunities were also constrained by their husbands’ positions within company hierarchy. In much the same way that Arab women spent most of their social time interacting with a small circle of familiar women, American women’s social networks were constrained to those other women whose husbands occupied comparable rungs within the Aramco bureaucratic ladder. Johnson complains about this kind of constriction in her memoir when she bemoans that “there was no freedom from the company, because there wasn’t anything else.”⁴⁷ American women had houseboys, usually Saudis or Pakistanis, who took care of almost all of the housework responsibilities that consumed so much of Saudi women’s time. To compensate, American women contented themselves with numerous hobbies and clubs, usually organized through Aramco networks. These restrictions, combined with the Saudi prohibitions against alcohol and driving, led many women to feel insecure and precarious. Dhahran, with its Southwestern ranch-style houses, green lawns, and swimming pools, attempted to mirror American suburbia, but it was a simulacrum whose imperfection weighed on many of its occupants. “The impermanent situation, the relative instability and narrowness of social relations, and restrictions on movement and activity,” wrote Kimball, “must give some substance to the belief that married women have a difficult time.”⁴⁸ The Aramco exceptionalist narrative, which focused on the hardships faced by Saudi women, conveniently ignored the similar struggles of American women in Aramco company towns.

Largely obscured within the story of Aramco's gendered hierarchy is the Arab perspective on American women. The Arabian Affairs Division's Orientalists were so busy analyzing and interpreting Saudi culture that they rarely recorded Arabs' own unfiltered opinions of Americans, and Arabs themselves rarely left written accounts in English. One does survive from Abdelrahman Munif, a Saudi novelist whose book *Cities of Salt* tells the story of the American colonization of a fictional Arabian village named Harran. The novel provides refreshingly realistic portraits of Arab women as strong, complex, and "capable of making hard decisions at the right time." Munif also satirizes sexist elements of Saudi culture, which mirror the abuses that American women suffered at the hands of men in Dhahran. The arrival of American women in Saudi Arabia sparks a storm of prurient curiosity among the village's men. At one point, the local emir and his deputy use a telescope to observe the American women sunbathing, their eyes "glowing visibly red from lust and contact with the telescope . . . occasional involuntary shouts from one of them spurred on the other, who pleaded, anxiously and pathetically, to let him have his turn quickly so he would not miss this glorious moment."⁴⁹ The author uses American women's position as sex objects, a position that reduces men of power to blubbing buffoons, in order to illustrate the perverse and repressed sexuality inherent in Saudi society.

But more than that, the entry of American women into Saudi Arabia marks a drastic turning point in Munif's novel. The day of the women's arrival "gave Harran a birth date, recording when and how it was built . . . the Harranis, born and bred there, . . . recalling the old sorrows of lost travelers and the dead—remembered the day the ship came better than any other day, with fear, awe, and surprise."⁵⁰ The coming of the ship bearing the American women sets off a series of disasters in Harran including displacement, poverty, and death. Much like Munif, Stegner also chooses the arrival of American women as a pivotal point in his retelling of the Aramco encounter in Saudi Arabia, although with a much different end result. Stegner uses the arrival of American wives at Dhahran in 1945 to mark the moment at which "the pioneer time of exploration and excitement and newness and adventure" gave way to "the time of full production, mighty growth, great world importance, enormous responsibilities, and the growth of corporate as distinguished from personal relations."⁵¹ Whereas for Munif the American women were harbingers of catastrophic change, Stegner tellingly chose their arrival to illustrate the closing of the Arabian frontier and the true beginning of Aramco's modernizing mission. For both authors, the gender of these women was intimately tied to the colonization and violence inherent in Aramco's Arabian enterprise.

The symbolic importance of American women in these literary works reflects the centrality of gender in understanding Aramco's operations in Saudi Arabia. Although Orientalist depictions of Arab culture emphasized the difference between Arab and Western gender roles, the two were in fact closely linked. One of the worst consequences of the persistence of Aramco's Orientalist myths was that it prevented its victims from realizing the humanity they shared. Aramco wife Mildred Logan, after speaking with several Saudi women, became convinced that "women everywhere have many of the same interests, problems, and thoughts."⁵² Yet even Logan, in her later writings, bought into Orientalist depictions of Saudi women as filthy and ignorant. In the image that the company projected to the world, Americans saw themselves as the emancipators of repressed Arab women. In practice, Aramco's racial and gendered hierarchies subjected both Arab and American women to similar forms of paternalism and violence. Hopefully,

further scholarship can continue to illuminate the important links between gender and power in Aramco's Arabia. 

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- For an excellent dissection of gendered depictions of the Middle East, see Michelle Mart, "Tough Guys and American Cold War Policy: Images of Israel, 1948-1960," *Diplomatic History* 20 (Summer 1996): 357-80.
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